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MIAMI-DADE COUNTY HONORS EXEMPLARY TAXI DRIVERS

May 10th 2001

It's August 27, 2000. Leslie Scappatara, a California resident visiting Miami, is dropped off by her mother-in-law at Miami International Airport for her return trip. Her mother-in-law drives off and Ms. Scappatara realizes that her purse, with all her money, is still in the car. In an effort to catch up with the car, and retrieve her purse, Ms. Scappatara hails a taxi. Later, with \$150 on the meter, her mother-in-law has not been located. Leslie Scappatara still has no purse and no money. She is in distress.

But this is her lucky day. The taxi driver not only forgives the fare, he offers her \$100 of his own money.

"You were a hero yesterday," Leslie Scappatara would later write to taxi driver Randolph Wynns.

The deed earned Wynns, a native of the Dominican Republic and a former New York City taxi driver, Miami-Dade County's Chauffeur of the Quarter award for July to September last year. His prizes were a plaque, a \$500 cash award and a two-night/three-day stay at a Loews Hotel, compliments of the hospitality industry.

There would be more awards and rewards.

On April 26 he was named Chauffeur of the Year and honored by Mayor Alex Penelas and the Miami-Dade County Board of Commissioners at a ceremony sponsored by District 3 Commissioner, Dr. Barbara Carey-Shuler.

The additional prizes included a \$2,500 cash award, another two-night/three-day Loews Hotel stay and airline tickets for two to anywhere in the continental United States. And the county's Consumer Services Department (CSD) will renew his two year chauffeur's registration for free; a value of \$110.

The CSD implemented the Chauffeur of the Year and Chauffeur of the Quarter awards last year, as part of the Taxicab Chauffeur Incentive Program (TCIP).

The TCIP is itself a major component of an overall effort by the department to upgrade and maintain the quality of the county's taxicab service, said Carmen Quinn, who coordinates the effort. She noted that upgrading measures were mandated by an ordinance approved by the Board of County Commissioners in 1998.

It was designed as an incentive to taxicab drivers who demonstrate outstanding service to residents, tourists and other visitors, Quinn said. It seeks to reward them for their courtesy, honesty, professionalism, personal attire, the state of their vehicles and their knowledge of the county and its historic landmarks, she explained.

The CSD receives nominations for the awards from passengers, the taxicab industry (including drivers), the hospitality and tourism sector, representatives of business organizations, the media, and the department's enforcement officers.

A committee comprised of representatives of the industry, the business community and the tourism sector, selects a winner for each quarter.

The other Chauffer of the Quarter winners in 2000 were Paul Aurelus for January to March, Elaine Meyer for April to June and Oswald Neptune for October to December.

Paul Aurelus, who also worked as a taxi driver in his native Haiti, and has been a chauffeur in Miami-Dade since 1988, was recognized for stopping to help another motorist whose vehicle had broken down during a heavy August 13, 1999 downpour. The motorist reported that Mr. Aurelus refused to accept payment for his assistance.

Elaine Meyer, who was a bank clerk in Brazil, before taking up residency in Miami-Dade in 1989, was nominated by a Canadian family to whom she returned a bag containing \$1,000 they had left in her taxi.

A similar deed led to the recognition of Oswald Neptune.

Neptune, who migrated to the United States from Haiti and drove a taxi in New York City before relocating to Miami, was nominated by a Pinecrest resident who said that he telephoned to tell

her that she had left her wallet in his taxi, promised to return it the following day, and did as he promised.

At previous ceremonies each received a plaque, a \$500 cash award, as well as a voucher for two-night/three-day stay at a Loews Hotel.

Paying tribute to the taxi drivers at the April 26 award ceremony, Commissioner Carey-Shuler acknowledged their role in the critical tourism and hospitality sector and described them as ambassadors of the County. “They are the first people who impress or discourage people [visiting] Miami,” she said.

It’s a role “professional taxi drivers” take very seriously, says Chauffeur of the Year, Randolph Wynns. “We have to show tourists the way we treat people here in Miami. We are the first people they see when they come here on vacation. So this is the first impression they get. We have to treat them the right way and try to help them in any way we can. That’s part of our job.”

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